

Screens Within Screens: The Interiors of Twitch

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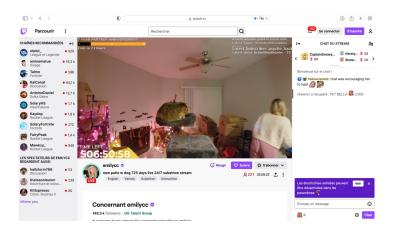
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Screens Within Screens The Interiors of Twitch Javier Fernández Contreras



Emilycc's Subathon on Twitch. Screenshot: Nov 2, 2023. It indicates: 725 days live 24/7; Time left: 506:50:58; Latest subscriber: psycho_back

"I am broadcasting live video of my life 24/7 to the internet. I started Justin.tv because I thought it would be awesome for people to see what it was like to be Justin. I convinced three of my friends (Emmett, Michael, and Kyle) to join me out in San Francisco. Now, we're starting a company to make broadcasting live video on the web easy. Thanks for watching Justin.tv. Let me know what you like and don't like about the show; I hope to hear from you soon."

Justin.tv. Lifecast: 12:09:01 AM, May 22 07 PST. Justin Kan's bio.

The relationship between architecture, online interaction and empathy defines the history of Twitch. Since its origins, the platform has explored the tension between live streaming and multimedia archiving, whether edited, shortened or removed from public access. Originally Justin.tv, a platform for broadcasting live founded in 2007 by Justin Kan, Emmett Shear, Michael Seiber and Kyle Vogt, the social network soon focused on video game streaming and was rebranded as Twitch in 2011. Twitch quickly became the go-to destination for gamers to livestream their gameplay and by 2013, the platform had more than 45 million active users. In 2023 that number has increased to 140 million, with an average of 103,000 streamers live at any moment, mostly broadcasting from within interior spaces.

Twitchers often use their homes as a backdrop, offering viewers an intimate glimpse into new forms of mediated domesticities. In this digital landscape, withdrawal from the external world is mediated through controlled interactions. Streamers curate their online personas and maintain a degree of privacy while simultaneously engaging with a global audience, broadcasting from within the confines of their rooms. Twitch

^{01 &}quot;Justin.TV Network Launches: More Shows to Come," TechCrunch, May 22, 2007, https://techcrunch.com/2007/05/22/justin-tv-network-launches-more-shows-to-come/

^{2 &}quot;Twitch (service)," Wikipedia, last modified December 9, 2023, 22:33 (UTC), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitch_(service).

⁰³ Daniel Ruby, "Twitch Statistics 2023 — (Users, Revenue & Insights)," Demandsage, August 2, 2023, https://www.demandsage.com/twitch-users/

belongs to the tradition of empathy within multimedia, the *mise en abyme* of TV programs where spectators see screens within screens and people inserted in them. These programs originated in the twentieth century, widely circulating the architecture of domestic interiors to their audiences.

However, Twitch embodies a fundamental shift. As a platform producing and distributing content streamed from within a variety of fragmented domesticities, it emerges as a case study for understanding contemporary interiors as places where the entanglements between live broadcasts, digital interactions and archival content occur simultaneously. The platform has progressively diversified its offerings. Today, content varies from Esports to gaming, music to IRL (in real life) and from live sports to a plethora of other popular cultural activities. Twitch simultaneously merges architecture, live streams, gaming, community interaction and content production together through its distribution system, ultimately exploring the specificities of the medium as a territory where the politics of contemporary domestic spaces are played out.

This essay explores the role Twitch plays in the construction of contemporary interiors as mediated domains—contextualizing Twitch within a broader history of image production and TV shows. Further, the work discusses the multiplication of spatial representations, as seen with online influencers and their everyday lives. Methodologically, the paper analyzes the ten most followed accounts worldwide and the thirty mostwatched videos per account from 2022. Together, these videos provide a X-ray of one year, an architectural cross section within a larger whole. ⁴ As the analysis illustrates, some Twitchers, such as xQc and Auronplay, eliminate all videos after the stream while others, like v or Tfue, edit and archive all their material online. Some Twitchers stream regularly for 3-4 hours at a time, whereas others go up to 10–15 hours. Outside the top ten, Emilycc has been streaming without stopping for more than 700 days as a result of a subathon, a format in which the influencer goes live for a minimum duration, which is extended each time a new follower subscribes. These livestreams can therefore last for days, weeks, months or even years, as the definitive triumph of a Warholian mediated existence. Amongst the ten most followed accounts there is only one woman, Pokimane, who also tested her persona as an avatar in 2020, following a common trend of virtualization during the quarantine. They all stream from interior spaces and in most cases appear disconnected from any circadian rhythm, regularly cut off from natural light. Welcome to the interiors of Twitch, a new architectural geography.

MEDIATED EMPATHY: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF TWITCH

Few viewing devices have played such an important role in the representation of interior spaces as the frame. For Johannes Vermeer, framing was a way of seeing through interior spaces, and, as David Hockney points out, in Vermeer's paintings "we see the most vivid use of optics," referring to the use of lenses to depict domesticity already in a photographic way. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the arrival of photography and cinema institutionalized the relationship between visual material and rectangular border, formalized as a primitive screen, forever transforming the art of the image. The paintings of Vilhelm Hammershøi, the photographs of Roger Fenton or the films of Yasujiro Ozu all show frame-within-frame composition techniques, using architectural elements such as doorways and windows

⁰⁴ Analysis conducted in the *Theory of Mediated Spaces module* (Prof. Javier Fernández Contreras, HEAD — Genève, spring semester 2023) by BA students in Interior Architecture Charlene Claveria, Lisa Divorne and Noémie Castella.

⁰⁵ David Hockney: Secret Knowledge, directed by Randall Wright (BBC, 2002), min 20:19.

as thresholds within their images to show depth and perspective, but also to create a sense of introspection and voyeurism.

These mediums present content that was composed, painted, photographed, filmed and edited before their distribution. Parallel to these experiments, twentieth-century TV culture produced one of the most consequential transformations to the way people experience interiors: the broadcast within a frame, a radical format based on watching people looking at, reacting to and commenting on audio-visual content. One notable precedent is Mystery Science Theater 3000 (1988-1999), which featured characters watching and providing humorous commentary on science fiction B-list movies. The show created a screen within a screen. Filmed from the perspective of a movie-goer, the show used the theatre's interior as a framing device. Through this lens the TV audience at home regarded the main characters watching the movie from within a film theater decor. Similarly, Beavis and Butt-head (1993-2011)⁷ was an animated series that followed two teenage boys as they viewed and commented on music videos and TV shows. In the twenty first century, Gogglebox (2013-present), a British reality show that films families and friends reacting to various TV programs, is the most recent successful example of this type of programming. These examples demonstrate the enduring appeal of watching others watch TV. Going further, however, they also illustrate the ways in which this type of programming can create a sense of shared experience and mediated empathy among viewers. Unlike painting and photography, this ephemeral empathy historically held excitement in its transience, as a moment of shared exhilaration, laughter or instant connection.



Mystery Science Theater 3000. "Episode 12: Fugitive Alien." Released: February 5, 1989.

Twitch is the twenty first century heir to these practices, embodying the contemporary transition of mediated images to multimedia empathy, from an individual regard to a collective interaction. Its ubiquity has led to significant evolution of its interface, starting from its predecessor Justin.tv. Launched in 2007, Justin.tv was originally a single-channel platform featuring founder Justin Kan, who broadcast his life 24/7, popularizing the term, "lifecasting"—the practice of continually livestreaming events in a person's life through digital media. Soon the project developed into a network with thousands of channels, allowing streamers to freely broadcast to unlimited viewers. Justin.tv's live interaction with online communities convinced its founders in 2010 that video gaming

⁷ Beavis and Butt-Head ran for seven seasons from 1993 to 1997. It was revived with an eighth season that aired on MTV in 2011.

^{8 &}quot;Justin.tv," Wikipedia, last modified September 23, 2023, 12:30 UTC, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justin.tv.



Justin.tv Lifecast: 12:09:01 AM, May 22 07 PST. Justin Kan's bio.

was the most sought-after content. In 2011, the platform transformed into Twitch. Twitch's new interface featured a simple layout consisting of a chat window and video player. The medium of streaming continued to expand and grow in popularity. Twitch incorporated additional sections, such as a directory of channels, recommended streams and featured content.

Due to its gaming DNA, Twitch has always prioritized community interaction, introducing features like subscriptions, chat emotes and badges early on. The latest interface, introduced in 2015 to enhance user engagement, places the live stream in the center, chat on the right and the menu and live channels on the left. Twitch allows streamers to utilize various types of interfaces for livestreaming, including full-screen self-streaming, insertion into the live screen of the videogame, use of avatars, or virtual co-streaming with different avatars while physically remote. Followers have the option to choose between live and archived content, watching livestreams as they happen or accessing past broadcasts, highlights or clips. As a developed form of hybrid media, Twitch merges the audio-visual stream with the online archive, bringing individual contemplation and collective interaction together via an endless accumulation of screens within the screen.

TEN TWITCHERS IN 2022: A GEOGRAPHY OF INTERIORS

Focusing on Twitch's ten most followed accounts, this analysis outlines the role social media plays in the current redefinition of our physical environment and its blurred boundaries, particularly how its representation directly impacts our everyday surroundings. Twitch's media characteristics suggest that the owner of the account shares all the information communicated on the platform. The app has integrated the complete processes of streaming and video production, allowing them to both be performed on a single device, the desktop computer. This integration is rooted in both the platform's origins and gaming culture, favoring the landscape format. The shift in design culture brought about by social media has given rise to its own spatial references, aesthetics and scenographic trends that together shape the following ten accounts.

Ninja, Richard Tyler Blevins, is a 32-year-old American Twitch streamer with 18.4 million followers. He predominantly plays Fortnite and streams for an average of 4 hours, often minimizing his presence on the screen. His studio setup creates a blue-purple atmosphere with minimal crowding. Auronplay, Raúl Álvarez Genes, is a 33-year-old Spanish streamer with 14.9 million followers. His content is diverse, spanning multiple video games such as Minecraft and Squidcraft, and his videos average around 3 hours. Auronplay engages in lively conversations with the people he plays with. El Rubius, Rubén Doblas Gundersen, is a 33year-old Spanish streamer with 13.7 million followers. He livestreams for an average of 6 hours and plays popular games like Squidcraft and Minecraft, often accompanied by others. Ibai, Ibai Llanos Garatea, is a 27-year-old Spanish streamer with 12.7 million followers. He produces varied content, including eSports and football programs, and his streams average around 2 hours. Ibai's well-lit studio showcases elements related to his work, and he often features reruns of events. xQc, Felix Lengyel, is a 27-year-old Canadian streamer with 11.6 million followers. Known for his Overwatch content, xQc livestreams for extended periods, ranging from 10 to 17 hours, and engages in conversations during gameplay. Tfue, a 25-year-old streamer, mainly plays Fortnite and Call of Duty with 11.3 million subscribers. His videos end with a farewell message, and he is typically alone in a relatively empty room. TheGrefg, a 25-year-old Spanish streamer with 11.1 million subscribers, mainly plays Fortnite and Minecraft. Details about his videos are limited, but his colorful background stands out. Shroud, a 28-year-old American streamer, has 10.4 million subscribers and diverse content. He appears smaller next to the game and streams from a living room or studio with darker tones. Juansgarnizo, a 26-year-old streamer from Colombia and Mexico with 10.1 million subscribers, has varied content, but no videos from 2022 are available. Pokimane, the only woman in the top 10, is a 28-year-old streamer with 9.3 million subscribers. She produces diverse content and streams from a bedroom studio, often accompanied by her cat or subscribers in vlog-style segments. Her background features changing LED lights in shades of blue and purple.



Ten most followed Twitchers in 2022. Top, from left to right: Ninja, Auronplay, Rubius, Ibai, xQc Bottom: Tfue, TheGrefg, Shroud, Juansguarnizo, Pokimane

The way of displaying content varies among influencers, creating a distinct architecture within each screen. Many Twitchers occasionally present themselves in a full-screen medium shot, showing themselves within their physical environments, particularly at the beginning of their broadcasts. In most cases, they later overlay this window onto the video game screen, simultaneously incorporating chat discussions with the audience. The viewpoint significantly differs from a traditional cinematic shot, for Twitch users largely embrace the tradition of placing webcams on top of large screens, resulting in diagonally distorted views. Tfue, for instance, reveals more room than others, with his body diminished, while

Shroud never displays himself in full screen. Pokimane unveils her bed in the background, adorned with stuffed plush toys and items that create a sense of intimacy. In contrast, most male streamers are situated in a more neutral environment, such as a studio or a corner with a plain wall in the background. It's noteworthy that Pokimane's background view is more expansive compared to others, emphasizing the significance of what lies behind her—a voyeuristic attempt to peek into her supposedly private space. During live streams, the frame showcasing her persona is often enlarged full screen, placing herself within the room as part of the composition.



Tfue's room in the 30 most watched streams in 2022.

The underlying notion presented to users is one of equal and undifferentiated access to the initiation, production and consumption of these media. Whereas the concept of virtual inclusivity often diverges from the realities of individuals and their domestic spaces, domestic interiors play a role in mediating this tension, serving as a means of agency within the disparity between an equitable virtual realm and an unequal physical world. While Twitchers may share similar backgrounds, it does not imply simple equivalence in their domestic environments. Rather, digitally augmenting one's environment becomes a means of appearing digital and digitized on the virtual platform, despite potential disparities in the physical world. This transformative shift has effectively eliminated the need for physical spaces like recording and editing studios or traditional media rooms, which were once integral to these creative practices. Following a production / consumption structure, Twitch defines a hierarchy in three main groups: the type of content that has the most success (based on views, follows, partnerships, etc.); the most valued influencers (based on top accounts discussed here (the group is predominantly white, masculine men who speak either English or Spanish); and finally related to the images of their material environment posted for public consumption, all products of this immaterial market, infiltrating the homes of populations worldwide.

The digital hierarchy, represented by rankings, roles and promotions, allows for a segmented marketing strategy which operates on both sides of the screen, catering to both viewers and Twitchers. From the viewer's perspective, on Twitch one can exclusively follow specific channels or content for free. However, subscriptions are available to enjoy additional benefits, including acquiring a subscriber badge, ad-free videos, access to exclusive emoticons and interaction with content creators. On the Twitcher's side, architectural interiors structure hierarchy and community dynamics. Streaming studios showcase creators' status, event

spaces allocate areas for promoted streamers, and collaborative spaces accommodate various roles. In subathons, the years-long format, sometimes the streamers exhibit biological needs such as sleeping, processes that are socially and economically validated by the viewers following a logic of "more subscribers > longer stream > bigger circadian disruption." In shorter live streams, Twitchers can choose to appear on camera or hide behind avatars that move in synchronization with their kinetics. These avatars, known as V-Tubers, enable different influencers to jointly conduct live streams, even if they are not in the same location. This sense of togetherness in the virtual world allowed Twitchers to connect during the quarantine in 2020, fostering new collaborations. More recently, in the Twitch-con format, Twitchers come together in physical arenas to participate in conventions where they play and are watched by their followers, marking the ultimate expansion from ubiquitous screens to situated iterations in the physical world.

DIGITAL ARCHIVES: THE TOPOS OF THE SCREEN

The archival practices of Twitch streamers exhibit a range of approaches, influenced by factors such as copyright regulations and content guidelines. Notably, the streams from 2022 by Ninja, Tfue, Shroud and Pokimane are readily available online, while Auronplay, El Rubius and TheGrefg have only retained one video from that year. Conversely, no 2022 streams by Juansguarnizo and xQc can be traced online. Some content creators opt not to save their streams to avoid copyright risks, such as background music. Creators can choose to not publicly archive their live streams, as the real-time format makes it challenging to anticipate and prevent content violations. For instance, in 2020, xQc received a compliant Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) notice to preempt potential copyright issues for content posted to his Twitter account, which was subsequently locked. 10 Twitchers have the autonomy to decide whether they want to store their videos on the platform and storage does not necessarily imply public accessibility. Archived material allows for the of the evolution of interior spaces to remain untraceable and, more importantly, it facilitates the final disconnection from the common underlying assumptions of architecture. While most Twitch live broadcasts do not display time, nor do they show windows or daylight, their "live" condition situates their temporal ethos, regardless of the geographic location of the viewer. However, archived material of noncircadian interiors finally unplugs them from any solar/lunar relationship, creating a flat time zone alongside architectural materials whose chromatics, reflections and tectonics operate within and by the digital topos of the screen.

In 2022, the top ten Twitchers the most watched streams featured a variety of content, formats and layouts. Ninja's most viewed video, titled "NEW SEASON ALERT!" with 1.2 million viewers, showcased *Fortnite* gameplay for a duration of 8 hours and 32 minutes. The predominant screen format featured Ninja in a small window positioned at the bottom left, while the game occupied the rest of the image. AuronPlay's stream titled "TORTILLA 58 pq" attracted 1.4 million viewers and focused on *Minecraft* gameplay for 4 hours and 13 minutes. The video showed the game in full screen, with AuronPlay positioned in a small rectangle on the left side. Similarly, Rubius's remaining stream, "NUEVO DIENTE," with 857,000 viewers, involved discussions for a duration of 6 hours and 20 minutes, with the game displayed full screen and Rubius positioned in a small window on the left. Ibai's remaining stream, "LA VELADA DEL

AÑO II," with 189,000 viewers, featured a special event, a wrestling match, for 5 hours and 39 minutes. The video showcased the event, focusing more on the spectacle rather than the commentators, including Ibai. Tfue's most watched video, titled "\$100,000 Tournament /w Cloakz n Scoped," attracted 1.7 million viewers and revolved around Fortnite gameplay for a duration of 6 hours and 13 minutes. The screen format had the Twitcher in a small window embedded within the game. Shroud's most viewed stream, "BiS DROP," accumulated 4.1 million viewers and centered around New World gameplay for a staggering duration of 17 hours, 50 minutes, and 19 seconds. The stream started with a 6-minute and 45-second "Starting soon" graphic, followed by Shroud appearing in a small window while the game occupied most of the screen. The Grefg's only available video from 2022 consisted of technical difficulties and lasted for 10 minutes. Juansguarnizo and xQc had no content archived for the year. Pokimane's popular stream, "HELLO <3 BIG DAY! TIME TO PLAY... GTA?:D," garnered 1.1 million viewers and showcased GTA gameplay for 5 hours, 14 minutes, and 56 seconds. The stream began with an 18-minute "Coming soon..." graphic, followed by Pokimane appearing in a large window for 12 minutes before transitioning to a small window while the game took the main focus.



Pokimanes's room in the 30 most watched streams in 2022.

On Twitch, streamers have certain control over their archived content, such as the ability to modify titles, thumbnails and categories. In cases involving unauthorized music, the platform may automatically edit the video by muting the audio during those segments or removing the video entirely to address copyright concerns. Many Twitchers also download their streams locally to share them on other platforms like TikTok or YouTube, where viewers can find compilations highlighting noteworthy moments from their lengthy streams. The virtualization of architectural interiors is evident in the ways streamers navigate the ephemeral nature of their content, employing videogaming and spatial design within the screen as strategies to track and simultaneously edit their digital creations amidst the ever-evolving landscape of internet culture. In 2022, the top ten Twitchers mostly broadcast while seated on a chair with a headset and a microphone in front of their computer. The background behind them was mainly static, typically a domestic space designed for homely video production. Since it's their profession, they were in their workplace. When archived online, the videos do not display the time of recording, creating a disconnection that, in the case of long streams, disrupts diurnal and nocturnal boundaries. Traditional axioms such as the architectural

dependence on daylight, or the tectonic window as the inside-outside threshold are contested, often replaced by digital screens as the only connective surface with the exterior world.

FROM VIRTUAL TO PHYSICAL: ERA OF THE MIRRORED ROOMS

"There are 2.5 billion gamers around the world, a diverse group united by their love of e-sports and gaming—and by being an overlooked group from a life-at-home perspective. But that is about to change: the new gaming range developed by IKEA in collaboration with Republic of Gamers (ROG) was launched at IKEA China on January 29, 2021. From May 2021 it will be available at IKEA Japan, and from October 2021 the range will be sales started globally."

IKEA. "Furniture That Puts Gaming First," 2021.

Approximately 4.42 billion individuals utilize mobile devices to access the internet globally, many using their phones to watch videos. The latest available estimate in 2023, however, suggests that only about 35% of Twitch views originate from mobile devices. 12 Twitch followers consume content online, within interior spaces and desktop computers as opposed to other forms of social media mostly consumed on the mobile phone. This spatial distinction produces a mirror of rooms, the room of the Twitcher and that of the viewer, normally physically isolated yet constantly interacting with other users online. In 2021, IKEA launched its catalogue of interiors for gamers together with Republic of Gamers (ROG), a brand specialized on laptops for gaming. According to the press release by IKEA, "the collaboration aimed to democratize the gaming experience, by creating relevant, functional, beautiful and affordable products and complete gaming solutions to make it easier for everyone to create the setup and the home they want."13 Notably, the IKEA and ROG collection was launched in January 2021, almost a year into the pandemic. The year 2020 marked a significant period for the streaming world, as enforced stay-at-home measures led to an exponential surge in live content consumption, including hours spent in front of the desktop computer.

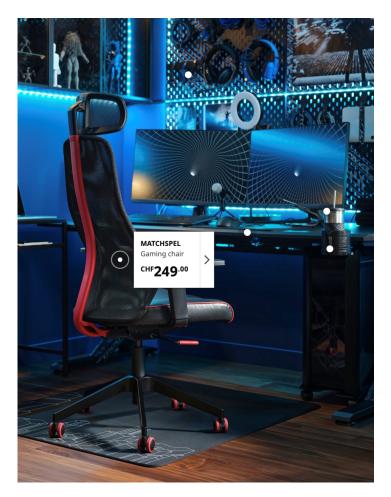
The reference to the home is hereby relevant. To that extent, Twitch transforms video games into a domestic show, infusing a new dimension by introducing a window showcasing the person playing, framed within space. This dual-screen overlay adds depth and a more immersive experience beyond just observing gameplay. In the context of the ten most followed Twitch accounts analyzed in this essay, the interiors where the streamers operate serve as the backdrop for their streaming activities, playing a significant role in shaping their online presence. The specific design and arrangement of these spaces are curated to align with the streamers' personal brands, effectively making them their workplace. The streamers, like traditional TV presenters, assume a commentator's role to engage with their viewers, but they do so in a live and interactive manner. Notably, they confine their content within the boundaries of the setup visible on screens, creating a controlled interaction with the outside world through streaming within the confines of a seemingly domestic setting. The color palette used in these spatial setups, dominated by shades of blue and purple, is a visually engaging choice that enhances concentration, attraction, and alertness for viewers. These colors are carefully selected to disrupt the sunlight spectrum and obliterate the circadian rhythm. Among

^{11 &}quot;Furniture That Puts Gaming First," *IKEA Newsroom*, February 2, 2021, https://about.ikea.com/en/newsroom/2021/02/02/furniture-that-puts-gaming-first

¹² Daniel Ruby, "Twitch Statistics 2023"

^{13 &}quot;Furniture That Puts Gaming First," IKEA Newsroom.

the analyzed rooms, only those of Shroud and Pokimane appear to incorporate natural light, albeit tangentially and with the windows hidden behind stores or objects. No architectural windows are visible in the rooms of the other Twitchers.



IKEA. Matchspel, gaming chair. CHF 249.00 (in Switzerland), 2023.

This visual identity underscores the significance of these domestic interiors in creating unique streaming environments. Notably in the IKEA gaming furniture, the photographs of the catalog display LED lighting and fluorescent color gradients that move away from the company's characteristic color palette and are more similar to videogaming chromatism. From an architectural perspective, this highlights the influence of digitally consumed interiors on the other side of the screen, that of anonymous users. The streamers, as technologically enabled actors, display their streaming environments, implementing their role as both content creators and space designers. To that extent, the institutionalization of social media has led to a proliferation of these digitally influenced physical spaces, where architecture is atomized and shared through a network of rooms or a cloud of data.

In the examples of frame-within-frame compositions of Vermeer, Hammershøi, or Ozu referred to at the beginning of the essay, the camera was always pointing in one direction, rendering invisible what lies behind the looking eye. However, if the screens from the users equally look at them and their rooms, rendering the directionality of the camera twofold, millions of domestic interiors are back in circulation online. We inhabit a pictorial moment, understanding the pictorial as not medium-specific, but mainly in the way the surface of the screen, with its endless capacity to assemble millions of rooms, both physical and digital, tangible and intangible, is fundamentally reshaping the episteme of space design. This suggests that architecture should be understood as a relational construct, not just in its interpretation in multiple chats but also in its design as a digitally enabled iterative process, shaped by what is streamed, edited, and registered on both sides of the screen.

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Twitch Analytics: Charlene Claveria, Lisa Divorne and Noémie Castella.